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Today's Civil Rights Struggle: Saving Health Care Reform

Don't be fooled. The superficial display of civility during the State of the Union speech Tuesday night was just that. President Barack Obama's annual address to Congress may have been received without blatant hostility from Republicans—we were thankfully spared another apoplectic outburst from South Carolina Republican Joe “You Lie” Wilson—but the GOP is mobilizing against him. Conservatives are determined to undermine, if not completely undo, the most significant civil rights achievements in decades: health care reform.

The historic legislation championed by President Obama will provide 32 million Americans with access to affordable health care, a basic human right. In his address, he firmly rejected Republican efforts to turn back the clock to a time when young adults, struggling to stand on their own feet, were forced off their parents' policies, when seniors were burdened with sky-high prescription drug costs and when insurance companies denied coverage to people with pre-existing conditions.

All Americans will benefit from the legislation, but Latinos and African Americans have the most to lose if progressives fail to protect reform. As a result of their historically limited access to comprehensive medical care, both groups today face disproportionately high rates of preventable medical conditions.

Nearly one in five African Americans is uninsured and therefore more likely to suffer from chronic medical conditions that could have been easily treated or avoided entirely. African Americans die from heart disease, stroke, cancer, diabetes and other conditions at a far higher rate than whites. Twenty-eight percent of Latinos are uninsured, and like blacks, are more likely to die from treatable conditions such as cervical cancer, diabetes and heart disease.

Here in Los Angeles County, we are striving to provide health care to one of the nation's most diverse and underserved populations. We are breaking ground this year on a new

Martin Luther King, Jr. Hospital, a \$400-million project that will provide quality medical care to a predominately minority community roughly the size of Philadelphia that has no in-patient facilities. But as we move forward with this and other landmark expansions of emergency and preventive medical and mental health services, we are counting on a partnership with the federal government to ensure that care is affordable for all.

Earlier this week, I led my colleagues on the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors in putting the county on record as opposing any and all efforts to undo the Affordable Care Act. We will resist wholesale repeal as well as the bit-by-bit undoing now being advanced by House Republicans.

Now is the time for us to stand firm with the president and protect the nation's best hope for a progressive approach to health care coverage. As progressives, we must make clear that the repeal of the Affordable Care Act would deny everyone, but especially Latinos and African Americans the most basic of rights: our health.

Mark Ridley-Thomas is a Los Angeles County Supervisor